Going Public: Tips for Presenting and Publishing Your Work

Alexis Easley, Ph.D.
maeasley@stthomas.edu

Finding & Pursuing Conference Opportunities

1. Access the Penn English CFP web site: http://cfp.english.upenn.edu/. You can sign up to receive weekly e-mail notifications of upcoming conferences and publication opportunities. Graduate student conferences are especially great venues for presenting your work.
2. Talk to your professors about professional conferences that encourage proposals from graduate students.
3. Keep an eye on bulletin boards and professional journals/newsletters in your field.
4. Subscribe to a listserv in your field.
5. Accept the fact that you are probably going to have to foot the bill for your conference registration costs and travel expenses. Consider it an unavoidable educational expense and an investment in your future. There is no way to get a sense of your broader academic discourse community without attending conferences.
6. Ask professors for samples of successful paper proposals. It’s important to get right to the point when making your argument in the proposal. Don’t frontload the proposal with a lot of references to secondary sources. Highlight what is new and original about your work.

Presenting a Paper

1. It generally takes about 2 minutes per page to read a paper. Try to keep it short so that you can include asides – brief diversions from your “script” that communicate your excitement for the topic. A conference paper is considered a work-in-progress, so it’s okay to talk about your research as preliminary (unanswered questions, future lines of inquiry, etc.) Talk slowly and make eye contact. Show enthusiasm.
2. When writing the paper, keep in mind that an oral text needs to be more conversational and have more obvious signposting than a written text (First, I will … Second … I will now move on to … For me, the most intriguing aspect of this is …). Beginning your presentation with the problem or question your research is addressing is a good idea. Throughout the paper, keep sentences short. Don’t be afraid to repeat key points.
3. On the text of your presentation paper, type the word “Pause” in parentheses where you want to be sure to take a breath when reading. I usually put this notation at the end of each paragraph and after key points and quotes.
4. Practice reading your paper a few times in front of someone who is unfamiliar with your work. Invite this person to ask you questions after you have finished (so that you can practice extemporaneous responses).
5. It’s best to cut out most of the quotes from your paper (so as to avoid “quote – unquote” repetition). If you do include quotes, put them on a handout so the audience can follow along.
6. Visual aids are always appreciated, just so they are scholarly. Avoid bulleted lists of points, but do include images, quotes, etc., that you plan to analyze in your talk. Include your name and e-mail address on the handout so that people can easily contact you after the conference.
7. If no one asks you a question during the Q&A part of the panel, feel free to jump into the general discussion anyway and ask questions of your fellow presenters. Don’t sit like a stump during the Q&A. Smile and look around (which is an invitation for people to ask you questions).

8. If you can’t answer a question someone asks during the Q&A, say something like, “That is a fantastic question. I haven’t yet looked into that issue, but it sounds like something I would like to investigate in the future. Thanks.”

9. Conferences are also for schmoozing. A good time to make contacts, exchange e-mail addresses, etc., is before or after your presentation (or someone else’s). It is nice to have someone you know come with you to the conference, but you are more likely to meet new people if you go alone. Going to the same conference every year will enable you to make meaningful contacts with people outside of your institution. If there is someone you met at last year’s conference that you would like to get to know better, e-mail this person ahead of time and set up a coffee or lunch date at the conference.

Publication

1. Writing a book review for a scholarly journal is a great way to get your feet wet. Contact the book review editor of any journal (e-mail addresses available online). He/she will most likely be pleased to give you a book to review. (And you get to keep the book!)

2. Volunteering to write encyclopedia and reference book articles is also a great way to get started. There will be calls for contributors posted on the Penn English site and on the listserv in your field.

3. Think of every seminar paper you write in graduate school as an article. Aim for producing article-length (18- to 25-page) papers, where possible. Tell your professors that publication is your goal and that you would appreciate feedback and guidance in this area. Establishing a writing & publishing group with your fellow graduate students is also a good idea.

4. Editors often solicit articles on specialized topics for special issues of their journals (e.g., the Victorians and literary fame). Keep your eyes open for a special topic that connects to your research. This is generally a great way to get your foot in the door. The specialist publications of literary societies (e.g., the Brontë Society Journal) are also great places to start.

5. Some conferences are known for undertaking publishing projects that involve members of their organization (e.g., reference books, bibliographies, proceedings). Talk to professors about which conferences in your field seem to be oriented toward these collaborative publishing projects.